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ABSTRACT

The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) is uniquely poised to assist an institution of higher education in conducting an effective, efficient, and meaningful self-study for reaccreditation. Drawing on the experiences of William Paterson University, New Jersey, this paper describes the steps an OIR can take to help ensure that the self-study process is successful. William Paterson University is in the first stage of the 20-year reaccreditation process, a period in which the University must conduct a self-study and prepare a detailed report. Before the self-study, the IOR should collect and maintain accurate data and serve as a source of institutional data for internal and external purposes. This data should be based on ongoing assessment that is relevant to the self-study process. The OIR must learn the data requirements of the various subcommittees early in the self-study so that it can provide the needed support. The OIR then can prepare a customized list of data resources for each subcommittee and can serve as a clearinghouse for the subcommittees. After the self-study, the IOR can work to fill any data gaps during the period before the accreditation team visits. (SLD)

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# THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICE IN THE INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION SELF-STUDY PROCESS

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## Introduction

The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) is uniquely poised to assist an institution of higher education in conducting an effective, efficient, and meaningful self-study for reaccreditation. Drawing on the experiences of William Paterson University, the presenters will highlight the steps the Office of Institutional Research can take to help ensure that the self-study process is a successful one.

William Paterson is currently undergoing reaccreditation evaluation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, our accrediting agency. This evaluation aims to determine whether the University continues to meet the accreditation agency's standards of excellence. In determining whether to accredit or reaccredit an institution, Middle States uses the following criteria:

- The institution must be guided by well-defined and appropriate goals.
- The institution must have established conditions and procedures under which its goals can be realized.
- The institution must be accomplishing its goals substantially.
- The institution must be so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to accomplish its goals.
- The institution must meet the standards of the MS Association's Commission on Higher Education[1] .

This year, William Paterson University is in the first stage of the two-year reaccreditation process. During this phase the University conducts an in-depth self-study and prepares a detailed report. This report will be revised, based on input from the University community,

[1] Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education. (1994). Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Standards for Accreditation [WWW Document] URL http://www.msache.org/charexcl.html (visited 1999, June 8), p.1

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in Fall 2000 and will be sent to Middle States in February 2001. In April 2001, a team of evaluators from Middle States will visit the University for an on-site reaccreditation review.

**The Self-Study Process**

Conducting a self-study in preparation for reaccreditation by Middle States generally involves writing a document that addresses structural and organizational aspects of an institution, including curriculum, finance, governance, faculty, students, etc. A steering committee, representing a wide range of constituencies within the university, usually leads the effort. A number of subcommittees are formed and each is assigned to conduct a thorough evaluation of one aspect of the institution and write a report. Each subcommittee will need data to carry out its charge effectively. The role of the OIR is to make the needed data available in the most timely and efficient manner and to assist subcommittees in addressing the data needs that arise during the self-study process.

**Role of the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at stages of the self-study process**

**A. Prior to Self-Study**

- It is important that the data cited in the Self-Study Report be official and consistent. Because of its familiarity with the structure of an institution's data, the speed with which the data can be generated, and the general complexities associated with the data, the OIR is best able to collect and maintain accurate data and serve as a reliable source of institutional data for internal and external purposes.

- Every institution needs to keep some basic data on an ongoing basis. These include information on admissions and enrollment information, retention and graduation, student satisfaction, etc. Additionally, Middle States great deal of emphasis on outcomes assessment. Institutions must examine whether they have sufficient outcomes assessment data and, if not, take steps to acquire them.

- Don't wait until the self-study begins to start conducting assessment studies. Assessment and evaluation should be done on an ongoing basis. When developing assessment instruments, keep in mind the agency's accreditation criteria listed above, and, to the extent possible, address these criteria directly. In this manner, you can demonstrate to the accreditation agency that you are involved in an ongoing self-evaluation, which is viewed positively.

- Start preparing early--Reaccreditation is a two-and-a-half year process, as the following timetable of our self-study shows[2]:

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[2] "Design for the Self-Study Process in Connection with the Reaccreditation of The William Paterson University of New Jersey by The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools." (1999, 27 May), p.44

**Self-Study Timetable, William Paterson University**

**February 1999**

- Develop initial outline of self-study design
- Day-iong retreat to introduce steering committee to self-study process, discuss institutional issues, review and discuss initial outline of self-study design, identify possible subcommittees and charges.

**March 1999**

- Develop draft of Self-Study Design document, including proposed subcommittees and charges
- Half-day retreat of steering committee to get feedback on Draft Self-Study Design

**April 1999**

- Revise Self-Study Design
- Mail preliminary packet of information to CHE staff member in preparation for visit.
- April 15, visit to campus by CHE staff member

**May 1999**

- Finalize Self-Study Design document and submit to CHE
- Finalize sub-committee membership and convene subcommittee chairs to review charges

**Summer 1999**

- Assemble resource documents and create resource room for use by subcommittees

**Academic Year 1999-2000**

- Subcommittees carry out charges and prepare draft reports (September-January)
- Review and revise subcommittee reports (February-March)
- Assemble and edit subcommittee reports to yield first draft of full report (April-May)
- Review and provide feedback on first draft of full report (May-June)
- Prepare and print second draft of full report (July-August)

**Academic Year 2000-2001**

- Distribute draft report and provide opportunities for discussion and campus feedback (September-November)
- Do final editing of report (December-January)
- Mail report to visiting team (February)
- Campus visit by Middle States team (April)

- Once a model and approach have been chosen, try to determine which of the currently available data are relevant to the self-study and what additional data must be collected. Starting early gives your office sufficient time to conduct surveys, special analyses, etc. and have data ready when they are needed by the subcommittees. It also gives your office time to evaluate whether you have the required resources to carry out the data gathering required for the self-study and make a case for additional resources if needed.

**B. Planning Stages of Self-Study --Working with Steering Committee**

It is very important that OIR staff know the data requirements of the subcommittees early on in the process in order to be able to provide the needed support. OIR representation on the steering committee and participation in the planning meetings is an optimal way of accomplishing this. Where direct representation is not possible, it is important that the OIR be in close communication with the steering committee chair or have easy access to committee charges in some other manner.

- To ensure that subcommittees have the data they need most efficiently, it is important that the steering committee establish rules and procedures for data gathering and dissemination. As the experts in this area, the OIR can assist the steering committee set up rules that will make the data dissemination process run smoothly. The following rules seemed to work best for our institution: a) The OIR is primarily responsible for meeting the data needs of the subcommittees; b) the OIR works with subcommittees to ensure that all information used is reliable and accurate; c) all subcommittee members have easy access to basic institutional data.
- Once charges have been written, it is important that OIR have access to them immediately in order to determine the subcommittees' data needs. By knowing what the charges are early in the process, OIR can begin assessing the availability of the needed data and start collecting unavailable data before the subcommittees start their work.

**C. During self-study**

- *Assess which of the available data may be useful to each subcommittee in order to carry out its charge and prepare customized lists of resources:* The OIR can help subcommittees by preparing for each a customized list of data resources that are relevant to that committee's area of investigation. At William Paterson, our office created

annotated lists of resources for each subcommittee that include the data resources most relevant to each group and explaining how each resource might be helpful to the subcommittee's charge. We then created a binder containing all group-specific resource lists, as well as information as to where the actual documents are located, which was distributed to all subcommittee members.

- *Make resources easily accessible:* In order for subcommittees to prepare their reports in a timely manner, they must have easy access to the data resources. The OIR can make this possible by collecting all existing documents, organizing them and placing them in a resource room. The resource room must be in a location to which all subcommittee members have easy access. At William Paterson, our resource room is located the library. The documents are arranged by general subject (i.e. Assessment, Faculty, Admissions etc.), rather than subcommittee, so that the subcommittees have access to all available resources and are not limited only to those items that appear on their individual list. Web technology is another potential vehicle for making certain resources readily accessible to subcommittees.

- *Serve as a Clearinghouse:* When subcommittees begin their work, inevitably many questions arise regarding data availability. Since the OIR possesses expertise in this area, it is advisable that it serve as the data clearinghouse, with all data requests going through it. Subcommittees will invariably need information beyond what is available in the resource library. Establishing the Institutional Research Office as the clearinghouse avoids duplication of effort, guarantees that any additional information is gathered in an efficient and effective manner, and ensures that all data used in the self-study are reliable. Beyond providing data, OIR should try to build relationships with the subcommittees to help them understand the data that they will ultimately include in their self-study.

- *Check accuracy of data in report before it goes to MS*

**D. After Self-Study is Completed**

- If data gaps still exist at the conclusion of the self-study, the one-year time period until the accreditation team visits the campus can be used to fill in some of those gaps. The OIR can collect or develop a plan for collecting the needed data during that period and add them to the resource library to be available to the visiting team. Acknowledging in the self-study report that a problem exists; presenting a proposal of how the institution plans to address the problem; and beginning to take action in the time before the team visits are viewed positively by Middle States. These steps indicate that the institution conducted a truly thorough self-examination and used this process constructively to improve areas that did not meet the standards.

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